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Employment

An In-Depth Look at the Many Issues Facing Transgender People

by Gianna E. Israel

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Can you imagine finding an employment position where it did not matter if you had a transgender identity? I frequently receive letters and telephone inquiries from all over the country, where good people are looking for work. As transgender persons, many are just looking to survive, others are trying to advance careers. Some people even ask if they shouldn't move immediately to San Francisco, believing employment for transgender men and women seems a more certain prospect.

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Many times I receive inquiries from people who assume that some type of transgender employment agency must exist or who ask if there isn't some type of work that actually welcomes transgender people. It almost seems as if after having gone through so much emotional pain, at the very least, they believe

they deserve a decent job. Regrettably, the world doesn't work that way, usually. In most cases such circumstances do not exist, you have to search for and create opportunities.

First, a word on relocation. Think long and hard about it before doing so. When you move, you are giving up any resources and the close proximity of relationships you may have built at your current location. Generally speaking, there are transgender men and women in every part of the country. I know this as a fact, having provided nationwide telephone consultation to nearly every state. There are transgender people everywhere, working in nearly every conceivable position. So, don't leave town just yet.

The best reasons for relocating are pretty easy to understand. If the area you live in doesn't appear to have many employment opportunities or room for advancement, it may be getting time to move. First, however, you would be well served in contacting other transgender people in your area. Find out how they are surviving and dealing with employment and discrimination issues. Also, find out how available positions are to the general public. You can do this by contacting your State's unemployment office. If jobs are readily available, you are then left to decide which one best suits your skills and interests.

If you feel you are not being hired because you have a transgender identity, it is time to look in the mirror and ask, "why?" Discrimination definitely exists. The fact is you really don't want to work for any employer who discriminates or doesn't appreciate the skills you offer. However, in looking in the mirror, make certain your manner of dress is appropriate for your intended occupation. Be aware that employers are most unlikely to hire you if there are any incongruencies in your presentation. In other words, be consistent. If you're name is Catherine, or Frank, dress accordingly. If you are in the midst of transition, an androgynous name and appearance is okay as long as you carry yourself with confidence regardless of whether you have disclosed your transgender status or not.

When you can't find employment one of the best reasons to leave town is if you find yourself being continuously harassed or discriminated against.

Particularly, if there seems to be no relief in sight. If your presentation matches your gender identity, and people are unwilling to accept you, for who you are, it may be time to consider moving.

To address the question of transgender specific employment. There are very few occupations which require having a transgender identity. The exceptions to this include working in gender specialized academia, counselling or therapy, or public health or education. These opportunities occasionally exist in large cities, and can be found in areas with progressive attitudes. For example, you might find a Gay/Lesbian community centre interested in hiring a transgender person should they be inclusive of diversity. Cities and counties with progressive attitudes may seek transgender persons interested in doing H.I.V. education.

Whatever the position, expect a great deal of competition from other highly qualified transgender individuals.

If you cannot immediately find employment in your location, if you're finances can realistically pay your bills, you may wish to volunteer at a hospital, non-profit organisation or at any organisation that interests you. Doing this will help build your social interaction skills,

which is particularly useful for persons in the process of coming-out. Demonstrating your abilities to others may spark job offers. The possibility also exists that you will hear of job offers as your contact with people increases.

Before seeking employment, particularly if you are in the process of transition, it would be useful to ask yourself a variety of questions. Doing so will help you gauge your potential for success. Thinking ahead will also help you prepare for difficult questions from employers and co-workers. For example, how long have you been living in role as a new man or woman? And, is this your first time working as such? If so, be prepared to package your transgender identity so as to not immediately put off others.

Packaging means to present or market yourself in the most positive light possible. In other words, marketing your skills, interests, and experiences as a selling point. If this is your first year of transition, and you are looking for work, stating you just began transition is not a very strong selling point.

Instead, when asked how long you have lived in your gender role, you may wish to infer you have done so for many years on a 'part-time' basis. This sounds considerably less inexperienced, since you may have any number of reasons why you are just going 'full-time'.

Generally speaking, the art to good packaging, is to present yourself in the best light possible. If you lack previous experience or skills, you may have to do so in a manner which cannot be disproved. This may sound phoney, and is so. The fact is, however, we as humans live in a world of illusions ... for example, to an employer, you are going to sound much more stable if you present yourself as such. As another example, many times people are uncertain how to explain to an employer vast periods of unemployment. This can be particularly so for people who transition, and had difficulty finding employment for months or a couple of years.

During an interview, if an employer doesn't ask, don't tell. However, if you are asked about a large period of unemployment, package your response positively. As long as it can't be disproved, you might have been spending time with family, travelling, studying privately, doing just about anything to improve yourself. That would sound better, and much less desperate, than saying you were straggling and struggling. On a similar note, in most circumstances it is best to not reveal the extent of emotional hardship or difficulties associated with having a transgender identity. This is true for both pre-existing and potential employers.

Within interviews and current employment relationships your first priority is to enhance a company or organisation's success. Make it clear to others that you are work oriented, stable and committed. With gender issues, make it a point to answer or address concerns that are relevant to the position. Discussing emotional baggage within interviews or employment situations will undermine people's respect of you. Interviews and the work place are no place to openly seek validation of your new identity, or to seek consolation because you have had difficulties in your personal life. If you need personal support, seek that from your friends, family, support group or gender specialized counsellor.

Within interviews and employment there also will be people who are curious about your transgender identity. Curiosity is okay because people are curious. I have frequently found that when others look at me unusually, if I do not assume their intentions to be hostile, in most cases people are just being curious.

During situations like this it is quite appropriate to let others know you have a transgender identity, and respond to general questions. However, be aware that some people's questions will be sensational in nature. In other words, they are looking for a cheap thrill at your expense.

Generally speaking, within the workplace it is appropriate to answer questions about who you are, how you deal with situations, how you deal with discrimination, how long you have been doing this, and which bathroom you use. However, when others begin asking you extremely personal questions you need to decide where to draw the line. In the workplace it is generally best to avoid long, drawn out discussions about every aspect of 'the operation', or discussing your sexual practices. If questions seem continuously invasive, ask yourself if these are questions people would be asking a non-transgender person. Usually, non-transgender persons are not repeatedly asked questions about their genitals or bedroom experiences, unless someone is looking for a date or one-night stand.

It is not rude to politely turn questions away which are personally invasive. It may in fact be required. However, equally so, there is no reason to be ashamed of being transgender. During the course of conversation in the workplace, if people are discussing how general, day-to-day issues effect them, it is quite appropriate to discuss how an issue may effect you as a transgender man or woman. Far too frequently transgender people hide in the closet when it comes to discussion of relationships, family, childhood, etc. People can learn about you, if you are willing to say how something effects you.

When thinking about employment issues, questions about stereotypes should be examined. For example, social pressure can frequently push transgender persons into accepting positions they don't want. This is particularly so in places where there are not a lot of jobs, or if a person doesn't have a lot of experiences or education. However, do not accept second best, at least not permanently. If your dream is to be a female mechanic, buy yourself a set of tools and get busy. Or, if you wish to be an F.T.M. florist, don't allow others' ideas of who you should be to stop you.

Finally, within employment, you can expect to face more typical gender discrimination issues, much as non-transgender persons experience. If you are a new man you may find women view you suspiciously or with fear. Or if you are a new woman you may find that men no longer take you seriously. This can be particularly true if you enter a new field where people are unfamiliar with you. For example, in addition to working as a gender specialist, I also work as a forensic mental health specialist. In other words I provide case management and court strategy for legal and institutional clients.

On one of my first cases while hiring a lawyer, more often than not, I noted that men were not paying attention to what I said. In fact, they treated me as if I was an impertinent schoolgirl bothering very busy men. Don't tolerate that type of attitude. In your actions - be firm, polite and business-like. If you are a woman, sometimes it is advantageous to link your name with a man, simply to gain that instant credibility as a newcomer to a field.

Finally, once you get settled into the role of working as a new man or woman, in many situations it is not always necessary to mention to others you have a transgender identity. People don't always need to know. However, if their discovering of your identity could harm you in some way, sometimes it is best to let people know up front. Basically, these type of decisions require experience having lived and worked as a new man or woman. If in the process of making a hard decision, do not hesitate to ask other transgender people how they would handle similar situations.

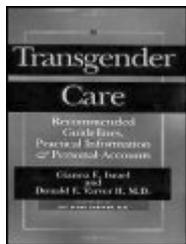
Gianna E. Israel

From Susan's Place: 📄 Gianna E. Israel was a therapist and author of many online articles regarding transsexuals and gender transition as well as the 1997 book *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts*.



She also published numerous articles on transgender issues, including a regular column in the magazine, *Transgender Tapestry*, and a series of gender articles which are published on Usenet and in C.D.S. Publication's TG Forum. Her writings on gender issues had a significant impact on the field and had an enormous impact on many people's lives. She spent nearly 20 years providing gender-specialized counselling, evaluations, medical recommendations, and mental health services across the United States. She even offered appointments by telephone for individuals without local support or who found office visits difficult. She was a member of H.B.I.G.D.A. and worked with thousands of transpersons in all stages of transition. She passed away on 21 February 2006 after a long illness and is a sorely missed supporter of the trans community.

A full list of her essays on the "[Differently Gendered](#)" 📄 website



Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information, and Personal Accounts
Author: Gianna E. Israel, Donald E. Tarver and Diane Shaffer
Publisher: Temple University Press (1998)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1566398527.

From Amazon Books: 📄 By empowering clients to be well-informed medical consumers and by delivering care providers from the straitjacket of inadequate diagnostic standards and stereotypes, this book sets out to transform the nature of transgender care. In an accessible style, the authors discuss the key mental health issues, with much attention to the vexed relationship between professionals and clients. They propose a new professional role; that of "Gender Specialist".

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide definitive information (in the context of consulting health professionals) on hormone administration, aesthetic surgery, and genital reassignment surgery. Chapter 6 takes up the little-examined issue of H.I.V. and AIDS among transgender people. There is also a chapter devoted to issues of transgender people of colour, as well as a chapter on transgender adolescents. The book contains a wealth of practical information and accounts of people's experiences about coming-out to one's employer or to one's friends or spouse. Several essays spell out the legal rights of transgender people with regard to insurance, work, marriage, and the use of rest rooms. The second part of the book consists of thirteen essays on a range of controversial topics.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.